

The Radio in the Language Classroom

By Suzelina M. Sakia

The radio can be used effectively in the EFL classroom to provide much-needed language practice. One advantage of using the radio is that it allows for authentic language practice. Programmes can be pre-recorded, and the same audiotape can be reused. Radio programmes provide currency to lessons and allow for natural initiation of students into “real world English.”

What's That Sound?

Radio 4 in Malaysia is a 24-hour radio station broadcast in English. There are numerous programmes which can be used in the language classroom. One that I have tried with my students is the “What’s that sound?” competition aired at around 7:45 a.m. every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning. Listeners call in to guess the sound played by the DJ, and if nobody wins on a particular day, the prizes snowball.

Here are the steps to follow:

1. Pre-record the programme for your classes.
2. In class, let the students hear the sound as many times as they need to, and list their guesses on the board. Students can also be grouped to make it more competitive.
3. Play the “programme” while students listen to callers’ guesses and compare them with their own based on the DJ’s response.
4. The student that gets it correct wins a prize. If none of the guesses is correct, students get to make new guesses. This goes on until the end of the programme (10 minutes).

Some of the sounds that have been used were “peeling a potato,” “dropping an empty drink can into a swivel top bin” and “pouring milk into a bowl of cornflakes.” Students learn new vocabulary and a lot of descriptive language from the DJ and callers as well as from each other. The answers have to be very specific. “Something falling into a container” will not be accepted. It has to be a can; not any type of can but “a beverage can” falling into a “swivel top bin,” and not just a dustbin or a pedal bin. “Peeling something” is not good enough and neither is “cutting a vegetable.” Callers had guesses like “cutting celery,” “trimming cabbage,” and there were hilarious ones too, like “someone with big feet walking on wet grass in the morning” (for the sound of cleaning a comb). Students try very hard to guess and be very specific. When they get into difficulty, their friends volunteer words and phrases.

This activity allows for authentic listening practice too. I was pleasantly surprised that quite a number of my students got hooked on the competition (it offers very attractive prizes), that they have gone on to listen to it “live” and tried to call in themselves.

Talk Shows

Another useful programme is the radio talk show. Topics of discussion are usually current events and issues that affect the majority of the population. All that needs to be done is audiotape one session on the basis of student interest and relevance. One that I have used was on the issue of caning in schools. Callers had a lot to say, ranging from fully supporting caning to outright opposition. Some were rather emotional, and therefore students not only got to listen to other people's views (and learn some language) but also commented on these issues and responded to them. Naturally our students started forming their views and took sides. A discussion was generated with the radio providing lots of language input and expressions which students could learn and use. Another topic which students took to (like ducks to water) was on "saying 'I love you' to your loved ones."

Conclusion

The radio is a very useful resource for the language teacher. Listening and responding to the radio is as natural and authentic a task as chatting with a neighbour. It also prepares our learners for authentic communication as well as independent language enrichment outside the classroom.

SUZELINA M. SAKIAN is currently teaching proficiency level and business English at the MARA Institute of Technology, Johor Campus, Malaysia.